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Jazz and American Culture

The Eurocentric hierarchy of cultures established at the turn of the century denigrated the new American music known as jazz. In contrast to harmonious, complex, exclusive Culture, jazz was denounced as discordant, uncivilized, overly accessible, and subversive to reason and order. Although there was no significant reversal of these attitudes until after World War II, jazz musicians, convinced that their art was an integral vibrant part of American culture, helped to revolutionize our notions of culture by transcending the adjectival cultural categories and insisting that there were no boundary lines to art.

THE INCREASING SCHOLARLY INTEREST in jazz symbolizes what I trust is an ongoing reversal of a long-standing neglect by historians and their colleagues in many other disciplines of a central element in American culture. The neglect, of course, has not been an aberration on the part of academics. In neglecting or ignoring jazz, scholars have merely reflected the values and predispositions of the larger society in which they operated. But even this simple statement belies the true complexity of the problem: American society has done far more than merely neglect jazz; it has pigeonholed it, stereotyped it, denigrated it, distorted its meaning and its character. The nature and significance of the type of attention our society has paid to jazz reveal a great deal about our culture.

Anthropologically, perhaps, my title—*Jazz and American Culture*—doesn't make a great deal of sense since Jazz is an integral part of American culture. But it is not culture in the anthropological sense that I'm dealing with here, since in fact that's not what culture meant to the society at the time jazz came upon the scene as a recognizable entity. When jazz became an identifiable form of music to the larger society, it was held to be something quite distinct from *Culture* as that term was then understood. It is the dialectic between the two—between jazz and *Culture*—that forms the subject of this article.

One can debate at great length the specific origins of the music we have come to know as jazz: *when* it first appeared, *where* it first appeared, *how* it was diffused, *what* its relationships to other forms of American music were. For my purposes, it is sufficient to observe that roughly during those decades that spanned either side of the year 1900, that period we call the Turn of the Cen-

ture, a music or musics that came to be known as jazz appeared in and were quickly diffused throughout the United States at the same time that a phenomenon known as Culture (with a capital C) made its appearance.

America emerged from the 19th century with most of the cultural structures that have become familiar to us in place, or in the process of being put into place. Adjectival categories were created to box and identify expressive culture: High, Low, Highbrow, Lowbrow, Popular. Though these terms lacked, and continue to lack, any genuine precision, they were utilized with some consistency though always with a degree of confusion since the terms themselves were confusing and deceptive. That is, Popular Culture, in spite of its name, did not have to be truly *popular* in order to win the title. It merely had to be considered to be of little worth aesthetically, for that became the chief criterion: the cultural categories that became fixed around the turn of the century were aesthetic and judgmental rather than descriptive terms. So pervasive did this system of adjectival boxes become, that from the early years of this century, if one used the word “culture” by itself, it was *assumed* to carry the adjective “high” with it. The notion of culture was lifted out of the surrounding world into the universe of gentility. The word “culture” became equated with the word “refinement” which in fact was precisely the definition it carried in the single-word definition pocket dictionaries popular at the turn of the century (Levine 1988:224–225).

Thus at approximately the same time, two new words—or more accurately, two older words with new meanings—came into general usage. Their dual appearance is significant because the two—Culture and Jazz—helped to define one another. That is, they served as convenient polar points, as antitheses. One could understand what Culture was by looking at the characteristics of jazz and reversing them.

Jazz was, or at least seemed to be, the new product of a new age; Culture was, or at least seemed to be, traditional—the creation of centuries.

Jazz was raucous, discordant; Culture was harmonious, embodying order and reason.

Jazz was accessible, spontaneous; Culture was exclusive, complex, available only through hard study and training.

Jazz was openly an *interactive*, participatory music in which the audience played an important role, to the extent that the line between audience and performers was often obscured. Culture built those lines painstakingly, establishing boundaries that relegated the audience to a primarily passive role, listening to, or looking at the creations of true artists. Culture increased the gap between the creator and the audience, jazz narrowed that gap. Jazz was frequently played in the midst of noisy, hand-clapping, foot-stomping, dancing and gyrating audiences. Those who came to witness Culture in art museums, symphonic halls, opera houses, learned what Richard Sennett has called “Silence in the face of Art” (Sennett 1978:230, 261).

If jazz didn’t obliterate the line between composer and performer, at the very least it rendered that line hazy. Culture upheld the differentiation between

the composer and the performer and insisted that the performer take no liberties with the work of the creator who in Culture assumed a central, often a sacred, position. Jazz was a performer's art; Culture a composer's art.

Jazz seemed uniquely American, an artistic form that, if Frederick Jackson Turner and his followers had only known it, might have reinforced their notions of indigenous American development and divergence from the Old World. Culture was Eurocentric—convinced that the best and noblest were the products of the Old World which the United States had to learn to emulate.

These two very different entities were expressions of radically divergent impulses in America. Culture was the product of that side of ourselves that craved order, stability, definition. It was the expression of a colonial side of ourselves that we have not done nearly enough to understand. I am convinced that we would know ourselves better if we understood our past more firmly as the history of a people who attained political and economic independence long before we attained cultural independence. Culturally we remained, to a much larger extent than we have yet recognized, a colonized people attempting to define itself in the shadow of the former imperial power. Jazz was an expression of that other side of ourselves that strove to recognize the positive aspects of our newness and our heterogeneity; that learned to be comfortable with the fact that a significant part of our heritage derived from Africa and other non-European sources; and that recognized in the various syncretized cultures that became so characteristic of the United States, not an embarrassing weakness but a dynamic source of strength.

It is impossible, then, to understand the place jazz occupied in America—at least until the years after World War II—without understanding that its emergence as a distinct music in the larger culture paralleled the emergence of a hierarchized concept of Culture with its many neat but never precisely defined adjectival boxes and categories.

In the *Edinburgh Review* in 1820 the Reverend Sydney Smith asked a question that was to haunt a substantial number of influential Americans for the remainder of the 19th century: "In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book? or goes to an American play? or looks at an American picture or statue?" (Smith 1820:79–80). Who, Smith was demanding, paid any attention to American culture at all? The question was quickly converted into an even more tortured query: *was* there an American culture worth paying attention to in the first place? As the century progressed an impressive number of Americans asked themselves some version of this question.

In his 1879 biography of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James created his famous litany of American cultural deficiencies which read in part: "no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great Universities nor public schools—no Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures." Americans, James concluded, had "the elements of modern man with *culture* quite left out" (James 1967:34–35; Pachter 1983:29).

Culture was quite left out because it required standards and authority of a kind that was difficult to find in a country with America's leveling, practical

tendencies. The real peril America faced, *The Outlook* declared in 1893, was not a dearth of art but the acceptance of inferior standards. “We are in danger of exalting the average man, and rejoicing in . . . mediocrity” (Criticism in America 1893:990).

Increasingly, in the closing decades of the 19th century the concept of culture took on hierarchical connotations along the lines of Matthew Arnold’s definition of culture—“the best that has been thought and known in the world” (Arnold 1875:44–47). This practice of distinguishing “culture” from lesser forms of expression became so common that by 1915 Van Wyck Brooks concluded that between the highbrow and the lowbrow “there is no community, no genial middle ground” (Brooks 1915:6–7).

The new concept of Culture that became powerful in these years took its inspiration and its standards from Europe as the young Charles Ives discovered when he attempted to inject American idioms into his Second Symphony which he completed in 1901 or 1902. “Some of the themes in this symphony suggest Gospel Hymns and Steve Foster,” Ives noted. “Some nice people, whenever they hear the words ‘Gospel Hymns’ or ‘Stephen Foster,’ say ‘Mercy Me!’, and a little high-brow smile creeps over their brow—‘Can’t you get something better than that in a symphony?’ ” (Ives 1972:52, 71, 131–132).

So little did the arbiters of musical taste think of their own country’s contributions that in 1884 when the critic Richard Grant White was invited to write a history of American music, he refused for lack of an American music to write about. American psalmbook-makers and singing-school teachers were, White declared, “about as much in place in the history of musical art as a critical discussion of the whooping of Indians would be” (Mussulman 1971:109).

There were some who began to see in American and, particularly, Afro-American folk music evidence of an indigenous American musical tradition. After hearing the Jubilee Singers in 1897, Mark Twain wrote a friend, “I think that in the Jubilees and their songs America has produced the perfectest flower of the ages; and I wish it were a foreign product, so that she would worship it and lavish money on it and go properly crazy over it” (Ives 1972:88–89). The most famous of these voices was that of the Czech composer Antonín Dvořák who was teaching and composing in the United States when he made his striking statement in 1893:

I am now satisfied that the future music of this country must be founded upon what are called the negro melodies. This must be the real foundation of any serious and original school of composition to be developed in the United States. [Dvořák 1893]

These notions flew too directly in the face of the comfortable evolutionary predispositions of the day which simply ruled out the possibility that those at the top of society had anything to learn from the “plantation melodies” of Afro-Americans firmly ensconced in “the lowest strata of society.” In the 1890s the Boston critic William Apthorp declared that such compositions as

Dvořák's *New World Symphony* and Edward MacDowell's *Indian Suite* were futile attempts "to make civilized music by civilized methods out of essentially barbaric material," resulting in "a mere apotheosis of ugliness, distorted forms, and barbarous expression" (Mussulman 1971:115).

These were the voices that prevailed. John Philip Sousa, America's preeminent bandmaster at the turn of the century, complained of the "artistic snobbery" that had plagued his career. "Notwithstanding the credo of musical snobs," he asserted, "'popular' does not necessarily mean 'vulgar' or 'ephemeral.'" To touch "the public heart" required inspiration and the "stamp of genius." "Many an immortal tune has been born in the stable or the cotton-field. *Turkey in the Straw* is a magic melody; anyone should be proud of having written it, but, for musical high-brows, I suppose the thing is declassée. It came not from a European composer but from an unknown negro minstrel" (Sousa 1928:341). The stamp of European approval remained the *sine qua non* for true culture. "Either we do not believe in our own opinions, or we feel that we do not know enough to make them," *Putnam's Magazine* complained. "How long will it be," it asked wistfully, "before London applauds *because* New York approves?" (Our Window 1857:133). Thomas Wentworth Higginson agreed. The discussion over whether the United States had a distinct culture would cease, he insisted, "When Europe comes to America for culture, instead of America's thronging to Europe" (Higginson 1867:33).

The primary obstacle to the emergence of a worthy American music, Frederick Nast asserted in 1881, "lies in the diverse character of our population. . . . American music can not be expected until the present discordant elements are merged into a homogeneous people" (Mussulman 1971:106). It was obvious under whose auspices the "merger" was to take place. In 1898 Sidney Lanier argued that it was time for Americans to move back "into the presence of the Fathers" by adding the study of Old English to that of Greek and Latin, and by reading not just Homer but Beowulf. "Our literature needs Anglo-Saxon iron; there is no ruddiness in its cheeks, and everywhere a clear lack of the red corpuscles" (Lanier 1898). American society, Henry Adams observed in his autobiography, "offered the profile of a long, straggling caravan, stretching loosely towards the prairies, its few score of leaders far in advance and its millions of immigrants, negroes, and Indians far in the rear, somewhere in archaic time" (Adams 1931:237).

It should hardly surprise us that such attitudes informed the adjectival categories created in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to define types of culture. "Highbrow," first used in the 1880s to describe intellectual or aesthetic superiority, and "lowbrow," first used shortly after 1900 to mean someone or something neither "highly intellectual" or "aesthetically refined," were not new terms; they were derived from the phrenological terms "highbrowed" and "lowbrowed" which were prominently featured in the 19th-century practice of determining intelligence and racial types by measuring cranial shapes and capacities. A familiar illustration of the period depicted the distinctions

between the lowbrowed Ape and the increasingly higher brows of the “Human Idiot,” the “Bushman,” the “Uncultivated,” the “Improved,” the “Civilized,” the “Enlightened,” and, finally, the “Caucasian,” with the highest brow of all. The categorization did not end this broadly, of course, for within the Caucasian circle there were distinctions to be made: the closer to Western and Northern Europe a people came, the higher their brows extended. From the time of their formulation, such cultural categories as Highbrow and Lowbrow were openly associated with and designed to preserve, nurture, and extend the cultural history and values of a particular group of peoples in a specific historical context (Levine 1988:221–223).

It was into this world of rapidly accelerating cultural hierarchy that jazz was born or at least in which it became a widely diffused music. In 1918 the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* described the “many mansions in the houses of the muses.” There was the “great assembly hall of melody” where “most of us take our seats,” while a smaller number pass on to the “inner sanctuaries of harmony” where “nearly all the truly great music is enjoyed.” Finally, there was still one more apartment

down in the basement, a kind of servants’ hall of rhythm. It is there we hear the hum of the Indian dance, the throb of the Oriental tambourines and kettledrums, the clatter of the clogs, the click of Slavic heels, the thumpy-tumpy of the negro banjo, and, in fact, the native dances of the world.

Rhythm, though often associated with melody and harmony, “is not necessarily music,” the *Times-Picayune* instructed its readers. Indeed, when rhythm took such forms as ragtime or jazz it constituted an “atrociousness in polite society, and . . . we should make it a point of civic honor to suppress it. Its musical value is nil, and its possibilities of harm are great” (Jass and Jassism 1918).

This was the paradigmatic response the upholders of “Culture” accorded jazz in the decades in which it was establishing itself as a familiar form of American music. As early as 1901 the American Federation of Musicians ordered their members to refrain from playing ragtime: “The musicians know what is good, and if the people don’t, we will have to teach them” (Moore 1985:75). On a January Sunday in 1922 the Reverend Dr. Percy Stickney Grant used his pulpit in New York’s Episcopal Church of the Ascension on Fifth Avenue to advise his parishioners that jazz “is retrogression. It is going to the African jungle for our music. It is a savage crash and bang” (Rector Calls Jazz National Anthem, *New York Times*, 30 January 1922). Jazz, the *New York Times* editorialized in 1924,

is to real music exactly what most of the “new poetry,” so-called, is to real poetry. Both are without the structure and form essential to music and poetry alike, and both are the products, not of innovators, but of incompetents. . . . Jazz, especially when it depends much on that ghastly instrument, the saxophone, offends people with musical taste already formed, and it prevents the formation of musical taste by others. [A Subject of Serious Study, 8 October 1924]

The *Times* returned to the subject again and again insisting that jazz "is merely a return to the humming, hand-clapping, or tomtom beating of savages" (His Opinion Will Not Be Accepted, 13 November 1924).

A writer in *Collier's* dismissed jazz as "trash" played on "lowbrow instruments" (Schauffler 1923:10). Once America regained its soul, Rabbi Stephen Wise proclaimed, jazz "will be relegated to the dark and scarlet haunts whence it came and whither unwept it will return" (Where is Jazz Leading America?: Part II 1924:595). Condemnation by analogy became a favorite sport. Jazz, various critics insisted, bore the same relationship to classical music as a limerick did to poetry, or a farmhouse to a cathedral, or a burlesque show to legitimate drama (Knowlton 1926:578; *The Etude*, September 1924:593). Jazz was attacked not only for returning civilized people to the jungles of barbarism but also for expressing the mechanistic sterility of modern urban life. Jazz, the composer and teacher Daniel Gregory Mason charged, "is so perfectly adapted to robots that the one could be deduced from the other. Jazz is thus the exact musical reflection of modern capitalistic industrialism" (Moore 1985:106). H. L. Mencken put it more succinctly when he described jazz as the "sound of riveting" (Moore 1985:108).

The denigration of jazz was not confined to white critics. Jazz music and musicians bordered too closely upon the racial stereotypes of rhythmic, pulsating, uninhibited blacks for many race leaders. Maude Cuney-Hare, the music editor of *The Crisis*, criticized the "common combination of unlovely tones and suggestive lyrics" that characterized much of jazz. "Music should sound, not screech; Music should cry, not howl; Music should weep, not bawl; Music should implore, not whine" (Cuney-Hare 1936:156). The advice that Dave Peyton, the music critic for the politically militant *Chicago Defender*, gave to aspiring pianists was to "put two or three hours a day on your scale work, [and] stay away from jazz music." Peyton complained consistently that "Heretofore our orchestras have confined themselves to hot jazzy tunes," too exclusively and that in general blacks remained too firmly within their own musical universe:

We have played music as we think it should be played without trying to find out if we are playing it correctly. So few of us have the time to visit the grand symphony orchestras, the de luxe picture houses and other places where things musically are done correctly. [Peyton 1928]

Lucien H. White, the music critic for the Harlem paper, *New York Age*, excoriated jazz as music "producing a conglomerate mixture of dissonances, with a swing and a lilt appealing only to the lover of sensuous and debasing emotions." White joined forces with the National Association of Negro Musicians, Hampton Institute's journal *The Southern Workman*, and many prominent blacks in attacking those who played jazz versions of the old spirituals. A Jewish musician who dared to transform the Hebrew's despairing cry *Eli, Eli* into a jazz number "would be cast out by his people as unorthodox and unclean," White charged. So should it be with black musicians who trans-

gressed “upon the outpourings of the racial heart when it was wrung and torn with sorrow and distress” (*New York Age*, 23 April, 7 May, 23 July 1921, 8 July 1922; Aldrich 1922). There was comparable anger on the part of whites when jazz musicians utilized themes from classical composers. Frank Damrosch was typical in denouncing the “outrage on beautiful music” perpetrated by jazz musicians who were guilty of “stealing phrases from the classic composers and vulgarizing them” (*Where is Jazz Leading America?* 1924:518). Jazz musicians, a critic warned, had better “keep their dirty paws off their betters” (Moore 1985:90). Throughout the early history of jazz, its practitioners were treated consistently as low-caste defilers of the clean and sacred classic music of both the white and the black societies they inhabited.

Not all the reactions to jazz were necessarily negative. In 1924 Leopold Stokowski, the conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra, attributed the “new vitality” of jazz to black musicians: “They have an open mind, and unbiased outlook. They are not hampered by traditions or conventions, and with their new ideas, their constant experiments, they are causing new blood to flow in the veins of music” (*Where is Jazz Leading America?* 1924:595). A number of critics praised jazz as a perfect idiom for articulating personal feelings. In one of the first books devoted exclusively to jazz, Henry Osgood called it “a protest against . . . the monotony of life . . . an attempt at individual expression” (Osgood 1926:247). Interestingly, jazz was also lauded for being a form of *national* expression. “No matter what is said about it,” the *Literary Digest* proclaimed, “jazz is a native product. . . . Jazz is completely American” (*Buying American in Music* 1934:24). In his influential book, *The Seven Lively Arts*, Gilbert Seldes called jazz “our characteristic expression,” which appeared to agree with those who felt it was “about the only native music worth listening to in America,” and, with the mixed admiration and condescension characteristic of the time, praised black Americans for articulating and keeping alive “something which underlies a great deal of America—our independence, our carelessness, our frankness, and gaiety” (Seldes 1924:83–84, 95–97).

There was no real contradiction between these apparently divergent sets of views. In fact, jazz was often praised for possessing precisely those characteristics that made it anathema to those who condemned it: it was praised *and* criticized for being innovative and breaking with tradition. It was praised *and* criticized for being a form of culture expressing the id, the repressed or suppressed feelings of the individual, rather than submitting to the organized discipline of the superego which enforced the attitudes and values of the bourgeois culture. It was praised *and* criticized for breaking out of the tight circle of obeisance to Eurocentric cultural forms and giving expression to indigenous American attitudes articulated through indigenous American creative structures. It was, in short, praised *and* criticized for being almost completely out of phase with the period’s concept of Culture.

It was this quality of course that made jazz one of those houses of refuge in the 1920s for individuals who felt alienated from the central culture. We have

come to understand the importance of such actual and symbolic cultural oases as Paris and Greenwich Village for those who sought relief from the overwhelming sense of Civilization in the post–World War I years. We need to continue to develop our understanding of the ways in which Afro–American culture, and especially jazz, served as a crucial alternative as well.

As I have argued elsewhere, many of those who found jazz and blues stimulating and attractive in the 1920s and 1930s did so because these musical forms seemed to promise them greater freedom of expression, both artistically and personally. This was especially true of young people who Louis Armstrong observed were among the most numerous and avid followers of the bands he played with. In the early 1920s, a group of young whites who were born or raised in and around Chicago and who were to become well-known jazz musicians—Benny Goodman, Bud Freeman, Dave Tough, Eddie Condon, Milton “Mezz” Mezzrow, Gene Krupa, Muggsy Spanier, Jimmy McPartland, Frank Teschemacher, Joe Sullivan, George Wettling—were stunned by the music of such black jazzmen as Joe Oliver, Jimmie Noone, Johnny and Baby Dodds, and Louis Armstrong, all of whom were then playing in clubs on Chicago’s southside. These white youngsters spoke about jazz, Condon recalled, “as if it were a new religion just come from Jerusalem” (Levine 1977:294).

The analogy was not far fetched: in their autobiographies these musicians often described what amounted to conversion experiences. In 1924 Eddie Condon, Jimmy McPartland, and Bud Freeman dropped in to a club where Joe Oliver’s band was playing: “Oliver lifted his horn and the first blast of Canal Street Blues hit me,” Condon has written.

It was hypnosis at first hearing. Everyone was playing what he wanted to play and it was all mixed together as if someone had planned it with a set of micrometer calipers; notes I had never heard were peeling off the edges and dropping through the middle; there was a tone from the trumpets like warm rain on a cold day. Freeman and McPartland and I were immobilized; the music poured into us like daylight running down a dark hole. [Levine 1977:294–295]

From these encounters the young white musicians absorbed a new means of expressing their musical individuality. But it was more than musical individuality; it was also the cultural freedom, the ability to be and express themselves—which they associated with jazz—that many of these young musicians found attractive. World War I was over, Hoagy Carmichael recalled, but the rebellion against “the accepted, the proper and the old” was just beginning. “And for us jazz articulated. . . . It said what we wanted to say” (Levine 1977:295).

This view was not confined to jazz musicians. Jazz, Sigmund Spaeth wrote in 1928, “is a distortion of the conventional, a revolt against tradition, a deliberate twisting of established formulas” (Brawley 1937:10). The vogue of jazz, Alain Locke insisted,

should be regarded as the symptom of a profound cultural unrest and change, first a reaction from Puritan repressions and then an escape from the tensions and monotony of a machine-ridden, extroverted form of civilization. [Locke 1936:88]

For younger black musicians, especially those whose careers began in the late 1930s and 1940s, jazz performed many of the same functions. "Jazz has always been a music of integration," the saxophonist Sonny Rollins commented some years later.

Jazz was not just a music; it was a social force in this country, and it was talking about freedom and people enjoying things for what they are and not having to worry about whether they were supposed to be white, black, and all this stuff. Jazz has always been the music that had this kind of spirit. [Gitler 1985:303, 311]

For black musicians jazz also provided a sense of power and control, a sense of meaning and direction, in a world that often seemed anarchic. In his autobiography Sidney Bechet thought about the ups and downs of his life and concluded: "The onliest thing I've ever been sure of how it was going is the music; that's something a man can make himself if he has the feeling" (Bechet 1960:102). In the 1930s a young William Dixon looked around his neighborhood and concluded that even in Harlem whites were everywhere in control: "it did seem, to a little boy, that these white people *really* owned everything. But that wasn't entirely true. They didn't own the music that I heard played" (Dixon 1964:70; emphasis in original).

The striking thing about jazz is the extent to which it symbolized revolt wherever it became established. In Denmark, according to Eric Wiedemann, "From 1933 on advocating jazz became part of the anti-fascist culture-radical movement" (Wiedemann 1985:395). Marshall Stearns, after lecturing at the Zagreb Conservatory of Music in 1956, reported that the Yugoslav students and faculty agreed that "jazz symbolized an element of unconscious protest which cut through the pretenses of tradition and authority" (Gillespie 1979:424n.). As recently as March 1987, two leaders of the Jazz Section of the Czech Musicians' Union were sentenced to jail for "unauthorized" activities. Karel Srp, who was not released until January 1988, was forced to spend 20 days in solitary confinement in a cell whose floor was covered with excrement (Skvorecky 1988:40-42). Thus the phenomenon of jazz as a potent and potentially dangerous form of alternative culture became well established throughout the world.

But the primary impact jazz had was not as a form of revolt; it was as a style of music, a medium of culture. That this music which was characterized as vulgar at best and as harmful trash at worst by the Guardians of Culture and that for a long time was appreciated largely by those on the margins of American society; that this form of music which seemed so firmly ensconced on the American cultural periphery, should become the most widely identifiable and emulated symbol of American culture throughout the world by the mid-20th century is one of the more arresting paradoxes of modern American history. For so many decades the Keepers of the Flame had predicted that when Europe took an interest in our expressive arts as well as in our machine shops, that when Europe looked to the United States for culture as well as for technology,

then and only then would we know we had truly arrived as an equal entity. And, as they hoped, Europe ultimately did come to America for culture—and the culture they came for was jazz.

“It required the stubbornness of Europeans,” the Frenchman Phillipe Adler wrote in 1976, “to convince America that she had . . . given birth to one of the most dazzling arts of the twentieth century” (Adler 1976:52–56). This is not to say that there was universal acceptance of jazz across the Atlantic. Many of the responses were familiar: in England in the 1920s Harold Spender worried that music in the United States might be “submerged by the aboriginal music of the negro” (Knoles 1968:120). In France the poet Georges Duhamel dismissed jazz as “a triumph of barbaric folly” (Duhamel 1931:121–122).

Nevertheless, jazz was accorded a more positive critical reception in Europe during those early years than it was in its own country. “Jazz is a philosophy of the world, and therefore to be taken seriously,” the German critic George Barthelme wrote in a Cologne newspaper in 1919. “Jazz is the expression of a *Kultur* epoch. . . . Jazz is a musical revelation, a religion, a philosophy of the world, just like Expressionism and Impressionism” (Starr 1983:12). Jazz, the Austrian musician Ernst Krenek, maintained, “has revived the art of improvisation to an extent unknown by serious musicians since . . . the contrapuntal extemporization of the fifteenth century” (Krenek 1939:260). In France Hughes Panassié placed the jazz band on a higher plane than the symphony orchestra for while the latter “functions only as a transmitter,” the musicians in jazz “are *creators*, as well” (Panassié 1936:2; emphasis in original).

In the United States, the types of jazz that were most easily and widely accepted initially were the filtered and hybridized versions that created less cultural dissonance. Listening to Paul Whiteman’s jazz band in 1926 Edmund Wilson complained of the extent to which Whiteman had “refined and disciplined his orchestra” and thus reduced the music he was playing “to an abstract pattern” (Wilson 1958:114). The degree to which blacks could be left out of this musical equation was stunning. In the mid-1920s the composer John Alden Carpenter praised jazz as “the first art innovation originating in America to be accepted seriously in Europe,” and predicted that “the musical historian of the year 2,000 A.D. will find the birthday of American music and that of Irving Berlin to have been the same” (Osgood 1926:249–250; *New York Times* 11 August 1924). After hearing the black pianist Earl Hines perform, Paul Whiteman went up to him and commented wistfully: “If you were only white” (Dance 1977:74). For all her dislike of jazz, Maude Cuney-Hare disliked preemption even more. “Just as the white minstrels blackened their faces and made use of the Negro idiom,” she complained in the 1930s, “so have white orchestral players today usurped the Negro in Jazz entertainment” (Cuney-Hare 1936:148).

But here too the preemption was limited by the fact that jazz was not for long an exclusively *American* affair. Eric Hobsbawm has written of the “extraordinary expansion” of jazz “which has practically no cultural parallel for

speed and scope except the early expansion of Mohammedanism" (Newton 1961:41). By the mid-20th century jazz was no longer exclusively American any more than classical music was exclusively European. Americans found that one of the results of creating a truly international culture is that you lose control over the criteria of judgment and categorization. The recognition that black musicians received throughout the world had its effect in their own country as well.

If André Levinson's declaration in the *Theatre Arts Monthly* in 1927 that "jazz is henceforth admitted into the hierarchy of the arts" was premature, and it was, it certainly understood the direction American culture was taking (Butcher 1966:95). Transitions are by definition almost impossible to identify with precision; they are most often gradual and cumulative. As early as 1925 the great apostle of classical music, the *Times'* critic, W. J. Henderson, admitted that jazz was the only original American music not based on European models, which explained why Europe had stretched out its arms not toward the American composers of art music but to ragtime and jazz (He Has No Scorn for Jazz?, 28 January 1925). Though there were others who perceived what Henderson did, I would argue that for most Americans the decisive transitional moment was not until after World War II when the cultural significance of jazz could no longer be denied. The highly successful tours of musicians like Dizzy Gillespie, Benny Goodman, and Louis Armstrong through Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, as well as Europe, brought national attention to the stature of jazz music, *American jazz music*, *Afro-American jazz music*, throughout the world.

It did not take the State Department long to understand that the visit of a musician like Gillespie to Pakistan stimulated interest not only in jazz but in American culture in general (*Semi-Annual Reports* 1956:5-6). "United States Has Secret Sonic Weapon—Jazz," a *New York Times* headline proclaimed in 1955, and its subhead added: "Europe Falls Captive as Crowds Riot to Hear Dixieland." What most surprised the *Times* reporter was not that jazz was popular but that it was taken so seriously. The European approach, he noted, "is what most Americans would call a 'long-haired approach.' They like to contemplate it, dissect it, take it apart to see what makes it what it is." He was informed by one European fan that Jazz contained a tension between musical discipline and individual expression which "comes close to symbolizing the conditions under which people of the atomic age live." Jazz, he was told in Switzerland, "is not just an art. It is a way of life." To his own surprise the reporter concluded that "American jazz has now become a universal language" (6 November 1955). The accumulation of these experiences ultimately made it common for national magazines to say matter-of-factly, as *Newsweek* did in 1973: "The U.S. wouldn't have an art form to call its own without jazz" (Jefferson 1973:52).

All of this recognition did not mean the total extinction of the easy responses of the past which had either denigrated jazz or explained its accomplishments

away. Amidst the tributes there was still condescension. In his *Music in American Life* Jacques Barzun could state that jazz "is our one contribution to music that Europe knows about and honors us for," even as he ranked it with "sports and philately as the realm of the self-made expert," spoke darkly of its characteristic "repetition and the excitement that precedes narcosis," and concluded that "jazz is more symptom and pastime than unperishable utterance" (Barzun 1956:85–86). Nor had Americans fully outgrown the convenient racial explanations for jazz that denied blacks any credit for hard work, application, or talent in acquiring musical skills which were generally attributed to genes rather than genius. As late as 1974 a man of Virgil Thomson's stature could marvel at black music's ability to incorporate every imaginable form of music: "European classical composition, Anglo-Saxon folklore, Hispanic dance meters, hymns, jungle drums, the German lied, Italian opera, all are foods for the insatiable black hunger," he wrote, and then, whether he intended to or not, he nullified his tribute by observing: "As if inside all U.S. blacks there were, and just maybe there really is, some ancient and African enzyme, voracious for digesting whatever it encounters in the way of sound" (Thomson 1981:498–500).

To say that by our time jazz has become part of that entity we call art is only part of the truth. Jazz in fact is one of those forces that have helped to transform our sense of art and culture. In the early 1930s the Englishman Constant Lambert argued that jazz was the first music "to bridge the gap between highbrow and lowbrow successfully" (Lambert 1934:206). One could go further and perceive jazz as a music that in fact bridged the gap between all of the categories that divided culture; a music that found its way through the fences we use to separate genres of expressive culture from one another. When Duke Ellington predicted that "Soon it'll all be just music; you won't have to say whether it's jazz or not, just whether you like it," he was articulating a feeling with deep roots in the jazz community (*Jazz Goes to College* 1971:67). "There is no point in talking about different kinds of jazz," Charlie Parker told a reporter. "The most important thing for us is to have our efforts accepted as music." When he was asked about the differences between jazz and European "art" music, Parker's answer was characteristic: "There is no boundary line to art" (Russell 1973:293). "We never labeled the music," the drummer Kenny Clarke told an interviewer. "It was just modern music. . . . We wouldn't call it anything, really, just music" (Gillespie 1979:142). In his memoirs, Dizzy Gillespie was willing to recognize only two categories of music: "there's only good and bad" (Gillespie 1979:492–493).

From the beginning jazz musicians refused to limit themselves; they reached out to embrace the themes, the techniques, the idioms of any music they found appealing and they did so with a minimum of fuss or comment. As early as the second decade of this century, the stride pianist James P. Johnson, who was to have a major influence upon Fats Waller and Duke Ellington, was paying little attention to the boundary lines: "From listening to classical piano rec-

ords and concerts . . . I would learn concert effects and build them into blues and rags. . . . When playing a heavy stomp, I'd soften it right down, then I'd make an abrupt change like I heard Beethoven do in a sonata" (Brown 1986:86–87). When the pianist Earl Hines discussed the formative influences upon his music, he included both the Baptist church and Chopin (Dance 1977:14). When Gil Evans was asked if the *Sketches of Spain* score he wrote for Miles Davis, which was influenced by the Spanish composers Joaquin Rodrigo and Manuel de Falla, was classical or jazz music he responded: "That's a merchandiser's problem, not mine" (Lees 1977:22). When Miles Davis was asked the same question, he responded similarly: "It's music" (Carr 1982:115).

None of this is to suggest that jazz musicians merely wanted to blend into the larger pool of musicians. They understood they had something special to contribute to the musical world. When the drummer Max Roach enrolled in the Manhattan School of Music and the trumpeter Kenny Dorham entered New York University, they were both told that they approached their instruments incorrectly. Roach understood that this was a reflection of the differences between jazz and classical music. Conservatories taught brass players a sonority meant to allow them to blend with other instruments while jazz musicians learned to seek a distinctive voice geared to the fact that in jazz individual interpretation is far more central than in classical music (Holland 1987). This is precisely what Benny Goodman was trying to express when he discussed his double life as a jazz musician and a classical clarinetist. "Expression," he maintained, was the great difference between the two kinds of music: "The greatest exponents of jazz are those with the most originality in ideas plus the technique to express them. In classical music . . . the musician must try and see into the composer's mind and play the way he believes the composer meant the piece to be played" (Goodman 1951:181). Mezz Mezzrow said the same thing less politely: "to us . . . a guy composed *as* he played, the creating and performing took place at the same time—and we kept thinking what a drag it must be for any musician with spirit to have to sit in on a symphonic assembly-line" (Mezzrow and Wolfe 1946:124–125; emphasis in original).

For black musicians especially, jazz was also a form of communal expression. Even as formally trained a musician as John Lewis of the Modern Jazz Quartet could insist, "We have to keep going back to the goldmine. I mean the folk music, the blues and things that are related to it" (Carr 1982:77). When the contemporary composer John Cage criticized jazz music for relying too heavily on emotions, the pianist Cecil Taylor refused to listen:

He doesn't have the right to make any comment about jazz, nor would Stravinsky . . . I've spent years in school learning about European music and its traditions, but these cats don't know a thing about Harlem except that it's there. . . . They never subject themselves to, like, what are Louis Armstrong's criteria for beauty, and until they do that, then I'm not interested in what they have to say. Because they simply don't recognize the criteria. [Spellman 1966:34]

In their refusal to be governed by the categorical orthodoxies that prevailed, in their unwillingness to make absolute distinctions between the vernacular

and classical traditions, in their insistence that they were just attempting to play *music* and just wanted to be accepted as musicians, in their determination to utilize the *entire* Western tradition, as well as other cultural traditions, jazz musicians were revolutionizing not only music but also the concept of culture. No one has put this better, again and again, than Duke Ellington, as he did in 1957 when he attempted to explain the impact that the Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford Ontario had upon his composition *Such Sweet Thunder*, a title he took from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: "I never heard so musical a discord, such sweet thunder" [IV, 1]:

I have a great sympathy with Shakespeare because it seems to me that strong similarities can be established between a jazz performance and the production of a Shakespeare play—similarities between the producers, the artists, and the audiences.

There is an increasing interrelationship between the adherents to art forms in various fields. . . . It is becoming increasingly difficult to decide where jazz starts or where it stops, where Tin Pan Alley begins and jazz ends, or even where the borderline lies between classical music and jazz. . . . I suspect that if Shakespeare were alive today, he might be a jazz fan himself—he'd appreciate the combination of team spirit and informality, of academic knowledge and humor. [Ellington 1973:192–193]

Ellington's outlook can help us to find our way amidst and through the cultural boxes and categories and fences with which we have so unnecessarily burdened ourselves. To understand what Americans since the turn of the century thought of jazz is crucial if we are to understand how they reacted to it or how the music and its practitioners were treated. But if we are to comprehend American culture, we can no longer afford to assume jazz really *was* what many Americans thought it was. We have to make that empathetic leap and allow ourselves to see jazz as an integral vibrant part of American culture throughout this century; to realize that before even the most prescient Europeans and long before any appreciable number of Americans thought of jazz as an indigenous American contribution to the culture of the world, jazz was precisely that. Jazz tells us much about what was original and dynamic in American culture even as it reveals to what extent our culture, or more correctly, our cultural attitudes had not yet weaned themselves from the old colonial patterns of the past. Jazz has much to tell us about our history and, indeed, much to tell us about ourselves if only we have the wisdom and the skill to listen to it and learn from it.

Notes

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